

THE AWARDING TO PENNINGTON OF THE  
DOCTOR OF DIVINITY DEGREE BY THE  
UNIVERSITY OF HEIDELBERG, 1849

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Introduction

Many writers have noted that Rev. J. W. C. Pennington, a black Presbyterian- congregational and A.M.E. minister was awarded a doctor's degree. Only one, Horatio Strother in The Underground Railroad in Connecticut, made direct reference to the ceremony in which the degree was granted. The following documents are proof that the theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg conferred the doctor of divinity degree upon Pennington.

The process which culminated in the awarding of the degree seems to have begun in 1843 during Pennington's first visit to Europe to attend the first General Anti-Slavery Convention in London, England.

Through his lectures and comments during this convention, subsequent ones, and especially the Peace Congress in Paris in 1849, Pennington greatly impressed Professor Friedrich Wilhelm Carove. Professor Carove was vice president of the 1849 Peace Congress and a member of the theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg. Pennington asked Carove to help him secure doctoral honors from the University of Heidelberg before he returned to the United States. Pennington did not receive the degree prior to his return from the first visit, but his name was held in high esteem, as evidenced below in the statement of the dean of the theological faculty. Thus, upon his

second European tour, the dean presented the request of Professor Carové recommending conferral of the theological doctorate upon Pennington. Even before the faculty heard the formal statement by Professor Carové, the dean suggested that the degree be awarded to protest systematic educational discrimination against black people in the United States. Other members of the theological faculty agreed generally with the dean, though one member of the faculty felt that Pennington should pay the cost of his diploma while another suggested that the cost of the diploma be divided among the faculty.

In presenting the request for conferring the doctorate degree upon Pennington, Professor Carové's argument was twofold. First, Pennington wanted the degree, not for himself, but for the advancement of the black race. The granting of such a degree from a prestigious European university like Heidelberg would be a recognition of the intellectual abilities and capabilities of the black race. Second, awarding such a degree, Carové contended, would be one way Europe could atone for its "guilt" in robbing black people in Africa, the United States, and the world of their "sacred human rights."

The degree awarded Pennington was the highest the University of Heidelberg could confer upon anyone. Pennington received the "honored theological doctorate," D.D. It was awarded "honoris causa" or with all the rights, and privileges appertaining thereto.

A brief biographical sketch of Pennington seems appropriate for those who might not be familiar with the unusual accomplishments of the Fugitive Blacksmith. He was born a slave on January 15, 1809 in Washington County, Maryland. A trained blacksmith, he escaped in 1827,

settled in Newtown, Long Island, New York, and became a Christian. In 1830, Pennington attended the first "National Convention of Colored People" as an abolitionist and anticolonizationist. He taught school in Newtown and later in New Haven where he studied theology with a tutor and listened to lectures at Yale Divinity School. Pastorates at the black "Presbyterian Church" in Newtown (1838-1840); Fifth (Talcott Street) Congregational in Hartford (1840-1847); and First (Shiloh) Presbyterian in New York City (1847-1855) followed. At Hartford, Pennington organized the Union Missionary Society, forerunner of the American Missionary Association; became the first black president of the Hartford Central Association of Congregational Ministers, and was a delegate at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London (1843). While the first minister of Shiloh, Pennington's autobiographical sketch The Fugitive Blacksmith (1849), was published in London. He had previously published A Text Book History of . . . Colored People (1841), and sermons and articles. In recognition of these accomplishments and as a symbol of his race's potential, 19 Dec. 1849, the University of Heidelberg, Germany, conferred the D.D. degree upon Pennington. On 5 June 1851, he was declared legally a free man in America. Elected president of the Convention of Colored People in 1853, Pennington was labeled an alcoholic in 1854. He, recovered, continued as an abolitionist, and published two notable articles before dying in Florida, October, 1870.

The Ehrenpromotion of Pennington below consists of four parts. The first part is the doctor of divinity degree itself. The second is the statement by the dean of the faculty, Professor Karl Bernhard

Hudeshagen (1810-1872). Part three is Professor Carove's address recommending Pennington for the degree. Parts two and three have been translated from German, except for the letters attached by Carove from American clergymen which were already in English, and thus, were not rewritten. The fourth part, then, is an English translation from the German of Pennington's Ehrenpromotion.

## Ehrenpromotion of J.W.C. Pennington

I have the honor to present in the annexed paper to the theological faculty the request recommended by Dr. Carove of Rev. J.W.C. Pennington, preacher at the Church of the Free People of Color of the Presbyterian confession in New York for the award of the theological doctoral degree, and I pray your favorable votum of same.

The theological doctrate as a rule is only given in recognition of scientific achievements there is no proof in this case, but there is only the unusually speedy and fortunate development of the intellectual abilities of a man, who until his 20th year was a slave and a laborer and who was driven by burning desire for education and qualification for the office of preacher.

However, in exceptional cases, outstanding service in the church will at times also be honored, and from this point of view there would be no obstacle to the request of such a faithful and hardworking servant among and for his unhappy and neglected color companions. From this point of view the request would, in my opinion, be highly recommendable.

The enclosed certificates of his New York colleagues testify to the personal esteem Dr. Pennington is held in. I also remember to have received the same mention with high recognition of Dr. Pennington during the Convocation of Evangelical Alliances, which took place in London 1847. Therefore, in regard to this point we can be assured.

In the final analysis the telling point is probably the one, which the applicant himself stresses. He demands the doctoral degree, not so much for himself, as for his color, which represented by him, and which is so deeply disdained in America. From the granting of his

petition, he hopes for an impulse in favor of the blacks and the colored in general.

I am actually the least inclined to help to bring about any marvellous feats through the unusual awarding of honorary degrees, or to advise the faculty to do so. However in the present case, it would seem to me, that actual concrete results could be achieved by the awarding. In most of the American states they attempt with the most unheard of cruelty to inhibit any higher educational development of the black and colored race and some church parties, for instance the Presbyterians of the Old School, aid in this process, and mistrust in this connection even the Holy Scriptures. By awarding this degree to Mr. Pennington, our faculty would express a factual protest, and would certainly further the good cause of the children of Ham, and would, in recognition of the special strivings of the promoted gentleman to educate his race to freedom, further a sensible--because there is also such a thing as a not-sensible--Abolition.

Therefore, I vote "salvo meliori" for the request of Mr. Pennington.

Hundeshagen

Heidelberg, 30 November 1849.

I concur with the Dean. One totally modest question. Does the honoris causa include the "gratis." In my judgment not necessarily. Only in the case that the faculty awards same totally out of their free desire.

(signature illegible)

I also concur with the Dean. The promotion honoris causa seems to exclude the demand for an honorarium. At least in this case I would not request it. There should be, however, no costs for the

faculty or the Dean resulting from this promotion. The costs of the printing and mailing of the Diploma etc. should be borne by the promoted person.

Ullman

Honorable Theological Faculty of the University of Heidelberg:

Rev. J. W. C. Pennington, pastor of one of the most important Presbyterian churches of the free colored people at New York, took part as a delegate of the Societies of the friends of peace in the United States at the Peace Congress which had assembled in Paris in August of this year (1849). There the respectfully undersigned became acquainted in person with this excellent man through whose spirited and heartfelt lectures delivered during recent years at several large meetings of the London and North American Anti-Slavery Societies, the interest of the undersigned already had been stimulated. His simple and modest means of behavior made the undersigned very soon very fond of him, and he finds himself very honored by the trust which Rev. Pennington has expressed (toward) him in that he asked the undersigned before he returned to America to receive doctoral honors from the University.

After everything had been revealed from Europe and America, concerning Rev. Pennington and his circumstances, the undersigned saw it as his duty to cooperate in the fulfillment of his wish. The undersigned undertook this all the more willingly since he is convinced that his demand will find no where a more willing ear than at this Faculty, the members of which, for their enlightened compassion, he so much cherishes and reveres. Therefore, I beg to submit this demand and futher his demand through the following information:

J. W. C. Pennington was born January 15, 1808 in Kent County in the state of Maryland. His parents were slaves. He himself was "loaned" at age seven by his master to a mason for three years.



After the expiration of that time until his twentieth year as a blacksmith, he grew up without any religious or other instruction.

The heavy sufferings that his parents and brothers and himself in spite of his impeccable behavior had suffered, moved him in 1828<sup>1</sup> to flee to the northern slave-free states. After eight frightening days, he reached Pennsylvania and found friendly reception at a Quaker who, during six months in his leisure time, gave him his first religious instructions and taught him writing and arithmetic. Through these (efforts) there awoke in him a lively desire for a scientific education, and after he next was inducted deeper into Christianity by another man of the Society of Friends in the county of Chester, he decided to enter the ministry.

In the Spring of 1829, he went to New York where he was deeply moved by the sad situation of the recently freed coloreds, and also found out that still three million of his brothers (and sisters) were suffering in slavery he made it his life's duty, to devote himself to (alleviating) these sufferings. One cannot read without being deeply moved what he reports abouts his mental sufferings (mentioned in The Fugitive Blacksmith, p. 51). While he now as far as his situation allowed, devoted himself to more advanced studies, and endeavored to become able to read the New Testament in Greek, he obtained a position as a teacher in a school. After this, in 1834 (he) entered the theological seminary at Yale where he was licensed in 1838, and shortly thereafter he was ordained as pastor of one of the free colored

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<sup>1</sup>In his Fugitive Blacksmith, p. 13, Pennington reported that he escaped in the middle of November, 1827.

Presbyterian churches at New York. Of his blessed activity we have pleasant testimony in the enclosed documents (no. 6 enclosed herein). Some of his writings which the undersigned herewith presents to the honored faculty (under numbers 1, 2, and 3) proves how seriously and earnestly he endeavored to prove himself a true shepherd by teaching and writing for wider circles and fighting the pretences and the prejudices with which the public still tries to defend the disgraceful oppression of several millions of his colored brothers.

The first writing is of 1839, at New York for the West Indies Slave Emancipation given to his fellow citizens. In the second, published in 1841, he illuminates the excuses or pretexts from Genesis used for the enslavement of the Negroes. The third is taken from a sermon on Isaiah 28:15 on the non-binding effect of a contract based upon an immoral covenant. Also, the already under number 4 mentioned writing, The Fugitive Blacksmith, which appeared in print two months ago, has only been written and published for Christian purposes. Its contents, the story of the flight of the writer from slavery, shall contribute to the exposure of the large corruption of slavery. The receipts from the writings shall be contributed (to) the church community of the former slaves. A religious publication appear(ing) in London remarks about this (herin enclosed under no. 5, p. 46), that the language is such good English, is so correct and so impressive and deep that they would do honor to a born Englishman of clerical experience and regular education. From these writings as well as from others of this great man, his brothers deduce with high pride that the same, that through spiritual qualification as through true Christian

demeanor and aristocracy of soul, seems to be excellently suited to achieve among his brothers in suffering "a blessed apostolical effectiveness."

Right now, he works at the release of those suffering in chambers of slavery as well as the decent treatment of the freed ones in North America. He claims that the coloreds even if they have been freed, are behind the educational (standards) of the white ones. This situation has caused the free coloreds in the United States to conclude, at a meeting of their delegates, to expend all their powers to eliminate all and any seeming excuse and also concluded that the Rev. Pennington seems excellently suited to bring this resolution to its fruition. The same one (Pennington) writes the undersigned:

My colored brothers as well as I myself, wish to spread among our youth the higher branches of education. As a result of this I am in the process of founding a school as an adjunct of my parsonage. Would not Germany like to be the first one to give a strong push to our endeavors by recognizing the struggle of my people using all its powers to educate my brothers and to evangelize them and to lift them up?

Following this he remarks:

This would encourage greatly the church I preside over as well as my still imprisoned brothers and also all friends of our cause among which there are many Germans.

He closes with these words:

I beg to convey my deepest and most sincere reverence to the honored theological faculty at Heidelberg and particularly and earnestly to assure them that I am not asking for the kind granting of the degree of Doctor of Theology on account of any personal merits nor for personal distinction. I hope to receive this high honor in order to encourage the entire colored population of the United States and for the support and futhering of my endeavors and work for the said population.

The truth and honesty of this exposition is verified by the excellent esteem that the Rev. Pennington is given in England and the United States, as the undersigned has learned from those who know him. The obedient undersigned is full of the pleasant hope that the honorable faculty will take into consideration and accept as sufficient grounds in this extraordinary (situation, and) accept the request to modify the demands which, according to the statutes, none who is demanding the natural theological doctorate.

Europe has to atone for a terribly heavy guilt for the wretched sons of Africa who since centuries have been robbed of their most sacred human rights. We must therefore take every opportunity that offers itself to help the robbed ones to their rights, to give to the freed ones as far as possible a repatriation for guiltlessly suffered insults and indignation. The large majority of the enslaved ones, is missing religious instruction, and to such a one who steps before them (the Heidelberg faculty) as a teacher of God's wisdom, there should be less scientific demands made than to someone who takes the studies in Europe. As the main motivation for Rev. Pennington's demands seem to be gentle in the religious sense, the feverent desire for helping, this clear intellect which Rev. Pennington in his present situation has already proven, if the obedient undersigned considers in addition what important influence a European education would have on Rev. Pennington could be futhered, if it would please the honored faculty of one of the oldest universities in Europe, to give him the desired distinction, then the undersigned does not believe he is

immodest in submitting to the honored faculty this application ("To Confer on Parson Pennington of New York, the honored distinction of the honor theological doctorate"). The University of Heidelberg was the first to confer this honor upon a Jew (Spinoza) who was called as a lecturer of philosophy; the University was the first in which a chair for natural rights and human rights was founded; may the honored theological faculty be the first who, through conferring this doctoral degree, to a North American, to a mistreated and despised North American, atone through this man for the sins Europe has contributed to natural and human rights.

Signed

Carove

Heidelberg  
December 19, 1849